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A New Inquisition, U.S. Style



By Professor Rodrigue Tremblay

In 1998, under President Bill Clinton, the United States acquired a new tool to interfere in other countries' affairs: the International Religious Freedom Act. The new law was introduced by Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) and Senator Don Nickles (R-OK) and was approved by the U.S. Senate by a 98-0 vote. The law was the direct result of the lobbying for Congress by many faith-based organizations during the 1980s and 1990s.

The stated purpose of the International Religious Freedom Act was to identify a wide range of diplomatic and economic tools that the U.S. government might utilize to encourage freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world. In reality, as is often the case in political matters, the "Religious Freedom" Act is really a misnomer. It easily could have been called the "Freedom for America to impose its religion and politics on other countries" Act.

An Office was subsequently created and mandated by the Act: the Office of International Religious Freedom, located in the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the U.S. State Department (note: during the Middle Ages, the Catholic Inquisition was called the "Holy Office").¹

It is headed by an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and is responsible for issuing an annual report on the status of religious freedom and persecution in all foreign countries by September of each year.² On the basis of this report, the State Department designates "countries of particular concern" for

American way. Religion, or the lack of religion, could become a political tool to denounce, condemn and attack other countries outside the international law framework and outside the United Nations.

Freedom of religion also means freedom from religion, because each individual has the fundamental right of conscience. Imposing religion is the exact opposite of freedom. It is ideologically totalitarian in nature, as it has been amply demonstrated throughout history. If, under the cover of freedom of religion, the U.S. government were to become a public promoter of religion around the world, it would be doing so in violation of the U.S. Constitution. No public money should ever be used to promote religion.

Already, the U.S. government has denounced countries, such as Germany, France and Greece, as being not religious enough, because they don't let some religious cults have complete liberty of action within their borders. A case in point is the U.S.-based and commercially oriented Church of Scientology.

For instance, the German government has concluded that the Church of Scientology is not a religion but a commercial enterprise, and should be regulated as such. French authorities also view the Church of Scientology with suspicion and don't recognize it as a religion. They consider it to be a totalitarian organization, opposed to democracy, and an economic enterprise that sells goods and services for money, and which, therefore, should pay taxes.

The cult, founded in 1954 by U.S. science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, was also denounced in Greece because although it had obtained a license to operate as a non-profit, public interest organization, it was seen instead as an organization devoted to making money, besides putting people's men-

their "systematic, ongoing and egregious" violations of religious liberty. These countries are then subject to punishing actions, including economic sanctions, by the United States.

It is easy to see how this new American religious messianism could become a censorship tool in the government's hands and taint the entire American foreign policy. The government could not only sponsor religious freedom and religious tolerance within its borders and abroad, but could embark upon the business of actively promoting religion and violating other countries' sovereignty. A U.S. Religious Chief Inquisitor would roam the world to make sure that American religious orthodoxy is followed in the

tal and physical health at risk by practicing a variety of mind-control techniques. In Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain, Israel, Mexico and the United Kingdom, the sect pays taxes as a commercial enterprise.

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What the U.S. government wishes is to be able to prevent democratic governments in Europe and elsewhere from protecting their countries against foreign invasion by U.S. commercial organizations disguised as religious organizations. All these countries have constitutions that protect freedom of religion and of conscience, and do not need a foreign power to teach them lessons on the means to preserve freedom and liberty. In fact, the democratic country which nowadays has the most laws on its books restraining freedom and liberty is the United States of America, with its Patriot Act and similar legislation that suspend the right of *habeas corpus* and even allow the establishment of concentration camps.³

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Footnotes:

¹ The Office works in cooperation with the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The latter was also created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as a separate and independent source of policy recommendations on religious freedom for the president, secretary of state and Congress. The Commission issues its own report, but has only advisory and monitoring authority, unlike the Office in the State Department, which has the authority to act.

The United Nations also has an organization devoted to religious freedom. In 1986, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights established the office of the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, now the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The U.N. Commission issues reports on a variety of countries, regarding religious freedom.

² In May 1999, Robert A. Seiple was sworn in as the first Ambassador-at-Large. Tom Farr is the director of the Office of International Religious Freedom at the Department of State and is responsible for preparing its annual report.

³ The U.S. military manages such a concentration camp in Guantanamo, a U.S. military base in Cuba, where prisoners are kept indefinitely, without the protection of the Geneva Convention and without the protection of the U.S. Constitution.

Overheard

People who believe they have God in their pocket and know what God wants for them have proven time and again that they're capable of doing anything because it's not their will but God's will being carried out. You see this most obviously in a suicide bomber—someone who is convinced he or she knows what God wants, and can end up doing



problem."

To hear people the week after 9/11 constantly talking up the need for more faith and the importuning of our God was, to me, the very definition of being "part of the